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COMMENTARY

On Captive Clienteles and Enshittification

Kevin Carson | Support this author on Patreon | August 13th, 2024

In a column four years ago, I recounted the experience of a friend in academia with the godawful "learning management software" which her institution required for designing exams. She complained

> that she was trying to create a midterm exam and "blackboard is complete fucking garbage. No intuitive way to break up questions into sections, can't give instructions for specific

sections, can't modulate to require answers for e.g. 10 of 15 questions that students can choose." Just as I suspected, she explained when asked that the choice of software was involuntary: "the three big ones are Blackboard, Canvas, and Moodle — 'learning management software.' Institutions choose one and then all instructors have to use it.

> Blackboard is the oldest and clunkiest and by far the worst."

A *Business Insider* article this month had a similarly negative evaluation of the workplace software "Workday."

> Since 2006, Workday, which provides software for payroll, talent management, and expense processing, has been making a mint creating misery where

painless processes could be. More than half of the Fortune 500 companies use Workday to pay, hire, onboard, and administer benefits to their employees….

LinkedIn, Reddit, and Blind abound with enraged job applicants and employees sharing tales of how difficult it is to book paid leave, how Kafkaesque it is to file an expense, how nerve-racking

it is to close out a project. “I simply hate Workday. Fuck them and those who insist on using it for recruitment,” one Reddit user wrote. “Everything is non-intuitive, so even the simplest tasks leave me scratching my head,” wrote another. “Keeping notes on index cards would be more effective.” Every HR professional and hiring manager I spoke with —

> whose lives are supposedly made easier by Workday — described Workday with a sense of cosmic exasperation. “It’s like constantly being botsmacked by bureaucracy incarnate,” said a copy director at an AI startup in San Francisco who had the misfortune of having to hire contractors through Workday.

So, as the subheading of the

article asks: “It creates mountains of busywork for everyone. So why does half of the Fortune 500 use it?”

The answer is actually quite straightforward. So much of the crap we interact with is like something out of *Brazil*, or the Feds in *Snow Crash*, because it’s designed by the stovepiped R&D bureaucracy of one corporation, for sale to the stovepiped procurement bureaucracy of another, for the use of a captive

clientele of powerless third parties (workers, job applicants, students, prisoners, taxpayers, etc.), with no one involved in the decision-making process accountable in any way to actual users for the unusable software and hardware inflicted on them.

Regarding hardware, a classic example is the mechanized ice pads for post-op orthopedic patients on the hospital rehab unit where I used to work. When I started work there, we had an

in-house stock of the devices that were actually quite good. They were sturdy, with durable pump motors, and had been endlessly reused for several years with no significant issue. Best of all, the ice chest portion had thickly insulated walls so that they only had to be drained and refilled once a shift.

That didn't stop the hospital from replacing them. The new model had thin, transparent plastic walls with little insulating

capability, so that we had to refill the ice chamber every couple of hours. And the motors were so shoddy that patients complained of being billed for multiple machines — at a few hundred dollars each — during a hospital stay of a few weeks.

Since bureaucratic hierarchies distort the flow of information from below, those at the top of the pyramid no doubt judged the change a resounding success. And since those at the tops of

bureaucratic pyramids communicate much better with those at the tops of other pyramids than with those in their own pyramid below them, the new ice machines were no doubt adopted as a “best practice” by other hospitals. Anyway, from management’s standpoint it doesn’t really matter whether the new machines work. They aren’t the ones who have to use them; and since the handful of big hospitals in the area all share the

same organizational culture and probably the same machines, it's hardly a competitive issue between them.

All of this is an object lesson in the pathologies of hierarchy, and the dysfunction that results from unaccountable power. Those in power make irrational decisions based on distorted information from below, and externalize the negative effects of their decisions on those below them.

The bureaucratic state and the giant oligopoly corporation are prime examples of this organizational model, which has become hegemonic in our society; together with large universities and other such organizations, they constitute an interlocking ecosystem of bureaucratic institutions all run by essentially the same circulating elites.

The only solution is to abolish these bureaucratic hierarchies:

decentralize them to the smallest feasible level, and put them under the management of those who are engaged in producing actual goods and services or are affected by their actions — i.e. workers, consumers, and the local communities where they operate. Only when direct knowledge, experience of consequences, and decision-making power are located in the same hands, will rational

functioning be possible.

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